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Visualized Innocence: A Cinematic Study of Childhood in Children of Heaven and the Colour  
of Paradise by Majid Majidi

Abstract: Film is a powerful and influential art form that arrived at the end of nineteenth century. It is a genre of literature, much different from other genres like fiction, poetry, and drama. In a way film is an incorporation of all these three genres. Many studies have been made on European and American cinema, comparing to Asian cinema. Among Asian Cinema, The Iranian films gained popularity only after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Since the revolution, Iranian filmmakers have increasingly created films centered on child protagonists. A few scholars have treated this phenomenon in their academic work. Iranians recognize the ubiquitous nature of children in Iranian films, yet the subject remains understudied. This paper aims at delineating how the Iranian director Majid Majidi uses child protagonists, through the analysis of two contemporary Iranian films; Children of Heaven and The Colour of Paradise. The child is analyzed, both as an agent whose problems and desires drive the plot, and as an object that makes us to imagine and reflect. The question analyzed here is whether child protagonists can be used to convey philosophical and complex themes rather than childish themes. Whether these films with child protagonists can be regarded as adult film is

also discussed.

Key words: Iranian Film, Child protagonist, Innocence, Education, Humanitarianism.

The Italian Neorealism and The French New Wave movement influences the Iranian cinema to a great extent. Iran is an Islamic nation and therefore the films produced in Iran are “a creative and controlled expression of a creative and controlled population” (Cathcart). The major subjects and themes explored in Iranian cinema are populism, family, nativism and gender identity. Love is rarely dealt with in modern Iranian Cinema due to the restrictions placed on the actor's and actresses' contact with each other. A women's perception of love is largely missing, and in that emotional and humanistic void, Iranian film makers find children. Abbas Kiarostami was the master of using children as protagonists in adult films. In the later phase of post - revolutionary Iran, however, it is Majid Majidi whose films have amazed audiences with their simple stories and poignant child characters.

Children of Heaven is the story of two siblings who are forced to share the same pair of shoes. Ali takes his sister Zahra's shoes for repair but unfortunately loses them. But Ali refuses to say it to his parents and he himself takes the responsibility of getting a new pair of shoe for his little sister. Ali knows his father's economic condition and is aware that his father cannot afford to buy a new pair of shoes for his sister. Also he knows that his father would scold him if he comes to know about the incident. The stress that both the children, especially Ali go through is portrayed heart touchingly by Majid Majidi. The brother sister love is depicted with all essence of purity and beauty. Everyday Ali and Zahra rush to each other so that one can wear shoes to school. The losing of this single pair of shoe and the despair of the

children makes the viewers anxious. Both do not have any complaints and there is no one to hear it even. Eventually Ali enters a race about which he comes to know about from his school. He takes part in it because one of the prizes is brand new shoes, and he plans to give them to his sister. Ali tries desperately to come in second at the race, and is truly disappointed by his first place win because he promised his sister the shoes. His entire struggle is unnecessary, however, for the last scene of the film shows Ali's father with a pair of new shoes for both Zahra and Ali.

Majidi clearly depicts the children's emotions-their guilt over lying to their parents, Zahra's shame at having to wear shoes that don't fit, and Ali's guilt for losing the shoes, which has placed his sister, whom he adores, in a situation that makes their poverty even harder for her to bear. In their love for each other, and in their love of family, Ali and Zahra illustrate the ideal of sibling relationships, but also the emotional depth and the accompanying isolation of childhood that can easily lead to great suffering.

Majidi Majidi commonly portrays the life of middle class families, and give focus on the children of such families. In *Children of Heaven*, Ali and Zahra belong to a lower middle class family where the children have to sacrifice their desires due to the family's economic condition. The first shot is a sustained close up of an old man's hands fixing a broken pair of girl's shoes. This opening shot in *Children of Heaven* is one of the most complex yet so simple of all. The shot uses extreme close-ups of hands working. These close-ups expose what would ordinarily be seen as everyday mundane actions, and transform them into moments of beauty, giving dignity to the worker and to the action itself. This is shown purposefully in order to hint on the family's economic level. Instead of purchasing a new pair

of girl's shoes, the parents have paid for this dirty, old, broken pair to be repaired with glue and thread. Zahra, though denied access to new pair of shoes, does not have any complaint to anyone. The camera then zooms out to show Ali patiently watching the man repair his sister's shoes. Ali is not restless like other children of the same age. He is an image of a child obediently running an errand, participating in city life.

The father's low economic status and the mother's bad health, forces Ali as well as Zahra to work in the house to help their parents. Zahra has to work in kitchen and she is also supposed to take care of their younger sibling. Ali has to go to market and when he is free, goes along with his father to work. He is a dutiful child and promises Zahra to find out the lost pair of shoes. "Don't say anything to Mom, I will find them" (Children of Heaven). It is evident that Ali is tensed when he repeats "please don't tell Mom anything". The little boy bears the burden of his family chores. Ali does not go to play with his friends when invited, because he is a responsible and dutiful son of his parents.

The film exposes the theme of humanitarianism. Humans rarely cause others pain deliberately. Indeed Iranians, adults and children alike, do their best to alleviate each other's suffering. Though Ali causes Zahra pain by accidentally losing her shoes, he cheers her up by giving her the golden pen which his teacher gives him for getting good grades. Zahra does notice when a young girl shows up at school wearing her shoes. Zahra follows her home but sees that her father is blind, and so she leaves without trying to get them back. This same girl picks up and returns this pen that Zahra drops at school. In this instance, the other girl knows she possesses an object belonging to Zahra and gives it back, unlike Zahra's shoes she unknowingly wears. At the end of the film, Ali comes in first place in the footrace and

receives prize and praise from his coach and headmaster. But Ali cannot be happy. He is disappointed that he did not come in third place so that he could win a pair of sneakers. He also looks around at the other boys upset that they did not win and observes their pain for losing something he did not intend to take away from them. Majidi depicts Iranian children as possessing an understanding of empathy and compassion and exercise these qualities when they realize they have hurt someone else.

The value of education is also emphasized in this film. Ali's devotion to his sister puts him in conflict with the authority figures at his school. He is frequently late for school and is even threatened with expulsion because of it. He displays the proper respect to his teachers, but is forced to place school second to the responsibilities of his family. But all the efforts of the children to share the pair of shoes are directly related to attending school. In a shot we see Zahra completing her exam before time so as to give Ali the sneakers. Though both have to help their parents at home, they find time to study. Iranian schools emphasize exercise; this aspect is also portrayed in this film.

The ability of children to communicate plays a significant role in the film. Ali and his father set out to do landscaping in a wealthy neighborhood in order to earn extra money. The father, intimidated by the obvious wealth of the large, gated estates, fails to sell his service; it is only with Ali's intervention that they secure a job. The customer is an elderly man who asks Ali to play with the lonely child there, while his father landscapes. The boy's grandfather pays Ali's father a significant amount of money for the work, which he later uses to purchase two new pairs of shoes for Ali and Zahra. Thus Ali himself becomes an agent to solve the problem created by him, though he would not come to know about it in the course of film. On

the way back home, on a bicycle, Ali and his father have an accident. Though this incident adds fuel to the family's sufferings, it ultimately leads to a happy ending.

Inside the high-walled streets of Tehran, in the family's one-room apartment, and the walled-in school grounds, Majidi's film reflects the children's limited world, and the confinement of poverty. In contrast to the wealthy neighborhood with wide scenes and natural scenery, much of the film's action occurs in narrow streets and alleyways, as Ali and Zahra runs to and from their schools to share the single pair of shoes. These claustrophobic spaces are the only spaces where Ali and Zahra become isolated from others, allowing them to exchange the shoes in secret. Only when Ali runs in the school's athletic contest do we have a glimpse of hope in the open countryside. The competition takes place on a wide road in a forest that surrounds a lake.

Using children, Majidi conveys a central message that if one works hard, one would be rewarded. The last shot is a close up of Ali's blistered feet while he sits in the courtyard pool outside his home. The audience observes in detail the result of the physical labor. Though Ali feels he has failed, the audience knows that Ali's father has bought new shoes for both Ali and Zahra, and he will soon be rewarded. The director never questions the existence of the children's spiritual lives or their inherent dignity. He simply tells a story in which the main characters happen to be children. In this way, he has made a truly revolutionary film-not one that trumpets its uniqueness, but a film that quietly and lyrically brings to us so many revelations about the human condition which simply can't be expressed in prose.

Majid Majidi's another profound movie that portrays childhood innocence is *The Colour of Paradise*. In this movie Majidi conveys a philosophical theme using a child protagonist and

his story. The Color of Paradise tells a story of an 8 year old boy who loves life just like any other child in his small Iranian village. Mohammad, however, has one thing that is different; he is blind. Mohammad does not let his disability prevent him from experiencing the world. Unfortunately Mohammad's optimistic view on life is not shared with his widowed father, a bitter man who sees his son's blindness as liability, especially for his prospects of marrying the woman he loves.

One of the motifs of Majidi's films is the protagonists' association and mingling with nature, in their moments of depression and solitude. Mohammad goes through this state of solitude several times in the movie. He enjoys being in nature and embraces the beauties of it through hearing and feeling. In the beginning of the film, we see Mohammad left alone in his boarding school, as all others are taken to their home by their parents. But during this time, he keeps himself in company with the nature. The air is filled with sounds of birds chirping. He is alive to every nuance. He hears the mewing of a cat and drives it away. Feeling his way with his feet and with his ears, he searches in the leaves on the ground for a fallen baby bird, whose chirping in despair he understands. The boy puts the bird in his pocket and after a tough struggle, climbs on the tree and places the bird in its nest near its panicked mother bird. The boy's compassion towards the bird, and his willingness and effort to help the creature disregarding his blindness is respect worthy. This act can be regarded as a satire on the modern society which deliberately shut their eyes towards the sufferings of their fellow beings.

Mohammad is portrayed as an epitome of love. He loves his family, his village and his school. He expresses his love through the touch of his hands. But the father fails to love his

son. For him Mohammad is a burden. His wife is dead and he falls in love with another woman of the village. He says to her about his two daughters, but not about Mohammad. But the granny and his siblings welcome him with an open heart filled with love. The sibling bond is depicted by Majidi pleasantly. Mohammad's sisters are Bahareh and Hanieh; they are portrayed as always working in and around the house. It is a common scene in most Iranian films. This gives us the idea that Iranian children are hard working, unlike other children of the modern age who waste their time lazily. This film also gives emphasis to children's education. Mohammad is an intelligent and promising student. His blindness does not pose a threat to his studies. This is evident from the scene in the village school, where Mohammad corrects a child who makes mistake while reading.

Mohammad's journey from school to home is symbolic of the movement from city to rural life, which is a feature of Iranian New Wave films. Village life is portrayed with excellence. While in the bus, Mohammad feels the nature around him. When his father asks him to keep his hands inside, he says "I want to catch the wind" (*The Colour of Paradise*). Mohammad has a quest to know everything surrounding him. He asks his father who is immersed in his own thoughts, "what is over there". Father is not at all interested in his child's excitement and questions. He replies in a passive manner, "woods, forests ". In the village, Mohammad enjoys the beauty of nature through touch. Through the touch, he senses the colour of everything. This is possible because he opens his eyes beyond his blindness. Majidi, through this film advocates us to lift the veil that blinds our inner vision. Only by opening the inner eye, we can see God.

Religion is a major theme in *The Colour of Paradise*. The title of the film itself alludes to



religion. Majidi is interested in the ways in which God operates in our lives. Through the child Mohammad, Majidi shows how innocence, kindness and love ultimately lead to paradise. Granny is pictured as a religious woman. She takes Mohammad to the holy shrine; burns candle there, say prayers and wash his face with holy water. She is shown praying during the last moments of her life. Her death leads her to paradise. The grandmother's face brightens with light and a pleasant smile appears on her face during the time of her death. This image shows how kindness, love and prayer ultimately lead a human to God. The same message is conveyed when a heavenly light falls on Mohammad's dead hand, that moves to feel the colour of Paradise.

The role of Mohammad is played by Mohsen Ramezani, a ten year old child. The child though is not a professional actor, actually lives in the film. It does not feel like an acting performance. It feels like a real experience is unfolding before our eyes. His tears are not of an actor but it comes from heart. Sitting with the blind carpenter, Mohammad sobs:

Our teacher says that God loves the blind more because they can't see. But I told him if it was so, He would not make us blind so that we can see Him. He answered "God is not visible. He is everywhere. You can feel Him. You see Him through your fingertips." Now I reach out everywhere for God till the day my hands touch Him and tell Him everything, even all the secrets in my heart. (The Colour of Paradise)

This heart touching monologue is the main focus of the film. Throughout his life Mohammad searches God through his fingertips. The movement of his fingers after death suggests that he ultimately finds God. The carpenter listens to Mohammad and his only response is the comment, "your teacher is right ".Through all these Majidi advises the viewers to accept the

omnipotence of God.

By portraying opposite characteristics in the father and his son, Majidi celebrates the victory of innocence over selfishness. The father who contempt his son's blindness later realizes that it was he who was blind towards his son's goodness and worth. His mother's love to him makes him to rethink on his lack of love towards his son. His mother's death and the refusal of his lover's family to give her in marriage, is his reward for his greedy actions. In the end of the film he feels guilty for his actions and wants to love his son. But he is too late because, by that time the Paradise rewards the son with its colours.

In both these films, family is the most important theme and both families suffer from poverty. This adversely affects the children. The children are presented in limited space such as alleyways, the streets of Tehran, town in countryside, forests and so on. But their future is not limited as their surroundings. They undergo transformation in their limited spaces and as a result gain success.

In *Children of Heaven*, the problem is lack of a pair of sneakers. Ali and Zahra have the strong desire to achieve their goal of obtaining new pair of shoes. They make use of all the available opportunities in order to make true their desire. In the end both Ali and Zahra gets new pair of shoes. The father buys it with the money he earns from working in the town, for which Ali was, indirectly a cause.

In *The Colour of Paradise*, the problem is blindness. Mohammad lacks the ability to see the world through his eyes, though he has powerful insight. His goal in life is to see God. He tries to feel God in everything through his touch. While in the forest, a strange sound haunts Mohammad's father, but the same sound excites Mohammad as he finds the presence of God

in even that sound. Mohammad's problem of blindness is solved and his desire to see God is achieved in the end when he dies.

In both films, there is struggle within children's mind, which is solved at the end. Humanitarianism is emphasized in both films. When one film highlights sibling love, the other focuses on faith in God. Education for children is given importance. The society supports the children to achieve their dreams and desires. Majidi often uses close up shots to convey the emotions heart touchingly.

Through these two films it is evident that the children who possess innocence and a true vision will have a successful future in Iran. Majidi through his films not only enlighten children, but also instructs adults about the importance of morality in post revolutionary Iranian society. He conveys very high and sophisticated themes using child protagonists. Therefore we can say that these films are both Children's film as well as adult film. Hence child protagonists in Iranian Cinema, especially in Majid Majidi's cinemas play highly valuable and philosophical role than the role of mere playful kids.

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